

Submission to the Draft Plan for Literacy and Numeracy

Educate Together, January 2011

Educate Together welcomes the focus on literacy and numeracy that this report brings. In particular we welcome the information provided by the report of the Inspectorate on teaching and learning in this area, which can be used to inform the development of policy and good practice.

Many of the specific recommendations of the plan are also positive – a greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy in initial teacher education for all teachers, for example, is to be welcomed, especially if it is incorporated into a strategy to highlight literacy and numeracy across the curriculum.

However, we also have concerns about some aspects of the draft plan as currently outlined. This submission outlines our views.

Inequality and Families

Broadly speaking, the report appears to overlook the link between socio-economic inequality and literacy and numeracy. While any apparent or real drop in overall literacy standards is worrying, the persistent and significant problem in Ireland in relation to literacy, in particular, is focussed among people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

The direct link between low literacy levels – and indeed low educational attainment generally – and socio-economic disadvantage is well documented¹. The current focus on disadvantaged schools for targetted interventions on literacy recognises this. It follows that reducing inequality in society more broadly, and improving the overall economic situation of those children with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy, will do more than any compensatory educational interventions. Any plan aimed at improving literacy and numeracy should be linked a broader plan to reduce socio-economic inequality in society.

Furthermore the importance of the family in supporting literacy, in particular, cannot be strongly enough stated. Schools cannot ‘solve the literacy problem’ alone. References to the importance of families in the report are welcome, but it

¹ See e.g. Kelleghan, T. et al. (1995), *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Department of Education, Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin; Parsons & Bynner (2007), *Illuminating disadvantage: ‘Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the lifecourse’* Institute of Education, London.

is our view that considerable resources will need to be deployed in outside school initiatives to support families to support their children's literacy, especially in areas of disadvantage.

The current situation whereby the capitation grant schools receive falls short of meeting their basic needs compounds the inequalities faced by children in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, since their schools lack the fundraising power of middle class schools. These inequalities in the system must be addressed if a real commitment to improving literacy and numeracy levels where they really matter is to be shown.

20% of Educate Together schools operate in the DEIS scheme. Member schools in the DEIS scheme have made the point that any reduction of supports to schools in the DEIS scheme will inevitably impact on the literacy and numeracy skills of those most at risk of not achieving competence in this area. Similarly, any reduction of supports to schools generally will limit schools' ability to promote literacy and numeracy.

General funding and support for all Schools

Educate Together welcomes the reference to the importance of a whole school approach to literacy and numeracy. This should incorporate the needs of all students, including those with Special Education Needs and English as an Additional Language.

If the general supports and resources available to schools are improved, this will improve broad educational outcomes for all children, including literacy and numeracy outcomes. Reducing the pupil teacher ratio, increasing and improving opportunities for Teacher Professional Development, improving supports for students with Special Education Needs and English as an Additional Language, increasing the time available for whole school and curriculum planning, improving supports for school management and Principals, and providing adequate capitation grants will all have a positive effect on literacy and numeracy levels for all children.

“Relentless focus” and Curriculum Balance

The term “relentless focus” is used repeatedly throughout both the plan. We would ask that those drawing up the final plan reflect carefully on this term in the context of teaching young children in particular, so that what should be a broad and positive educational experience is not reduced to a narrow and negative one.

The fundamental aims and objectives of the curriculum at primary and second-level recognise the importance of students' multiple intelligences and the need for rounded development. The curriculum aims to provide a broad and balanced educational experience, incorporating the acquisition of a range of knowledge,

understanding, skills, experiences and attitudes, and schools should work to deliver this curriculum in a way which maximises student engagement. The repeated references to a “relentless focus” on literacy and numeracy suggest that the importance of breadth and balance is being overlooked.

Research into the experiences of students at second-level², for example, shows clearly that students become less engaged in their education as they progress. Early school leaving is a persistent problem affecting the very children and young people most likely to have low levels of literacy and numeracy; those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A “relentless focus” on literacy and numeracy suggests a narrowing of the educational experience which seems unlikely to improve the school experience for these students or to engage those at most risk of dropping out.

While an increased focus at planning level on the development of students’ literacy and numeracy skills is welcome, Educate Together feels that this should be integrated across the curriculum, rather than detracting from time spent on specific curricular or skills areas which may be deemed less ‘important’ by implication. There is a danger that any generic directive to spend more time on literacy, for example, could lead to a narrowing of both curriculum and methodologies, especially should any such directive be made without CPD and support for teachers to ensure the best, most integrated approach are employed.

Standardised testing

The Draft Plan recommends national standardised testing at in primary school and in junior cycle. Educate Together supports the view that data should be gathered on levels of literacy and numeracy, but is concerned that this data should be gathered and used in way that promotes the improvement of outcomes for all and the enhancement of teaching and learning generally.

Experience in other countries suggests that there are risks in introducing national standardised testing, especially where results of these tests are made publicly available. These risks include narrowing the range of teaching and learning methodologies employed, increased time spent practising for tests, a less engaging educational experience, an increase in the more negative aspects of competition between schools, and increased anxiety and stress for students.

There is a great deal to be learned from the negative outcomes of national standardised testing in the US and the UK in particular. There is a very real danger that any attempts to use ‘top-down’ accountability mechanisms as a tool to improve standards will actually have the opposite effect for those most at risk; that inequality of educational outcomes will actually be worsened, and that

² Smyth et al. 2009, [Junior Cycle Education: Insights from a Longitudinal Study of Students](#), (ESRI Research Bulletin 2009/4/1)

school will become an even less engaging place for those with the lowest literacy and numeracy levels.

We would suggest that rather than spending money on an expensive national testing system, overall literacy and numeracy levels can adequately be monitored through sampled tests. The detailed monitoring of individual students' progress should continue to be the responsibility of the school. If an investment is to be made in evaluating literacy levels, it should be focussed on supporting schools to engage in sophisticated evaluation which can be used to enhance teaching and learning, rather than on producing statistics which do nothing in themselves to promote literacy and numeracy.

Teacher Education

The proposal that Initial Teacher Education be expanded to allow time for a greater focus on literacy and numeracy is welcome. However, this must be properly funded and resourced if the overall quality of the preparation and education teachers receive is to be enhanced, and there should be a focus on improving methodologies and learning experiences as well as simply increasing time.

Evidence suggests that high quality teaching and leadership are important factors in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes³ and it follows that focussing on supporting teachers to develop the best skills and resources should have a powerful effect. We believe a greater emphasis should be placed on Teacher Professional Development in this respect. There is a danger that increasing the focus on numeracy and literacy without appropriate support and guidance might result in some cases in teachers increasing time spent on a narrow range of activities, rather than on improving the actual quality of the learning experience or the outcomes.

In considering how best to improve Teacher Education and Professional Development, appropriate attention should be paid to the use of technology in the classroom, and the enormous potential of ICT as a tool to differentiate learning and to enhance literacy and numeracy.

Summary and Conclusions

We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the development of plans in this important area. We hope that the views of all stakeholders are taken into account in the development and implementation of final plans, and we trust that the final plans will fully reflect research findings and evidence available in Ireland and in other countries.

³ see e.g. Greenwood et al. (2009) *Improving literacy outcomes for all students through leadership in learning*, University of Canterbury

Broadly speaking, the aspects of the plan which are most welcome are those which relate to:

- Improving teacher education and professional development in relation to literacy and numeracy
- Integrating literacy and numeracy across the curriculum
- Supporting a whole school approach to literacy and numeracy

Of most concern would be any suggestions relating to:

- National standardised testing
- 'One-size-fits-all' solutions
- Non-recognition of equality issues in relation to literacy and numeracy

All good teachers currently monitor their students' levels of literacy and numeracy and work to ensure that all students achieve their full potential in this area – and in all areas of their education and development. They do this by adapting their methodologies to best meet the individual needs of their students in their classes and by make use of all available tools and resources.

The best schools support teachers to plan collaboratively and to engage in reflective and evidence-based practice to find the best approaches. The focus of any plan to improve literacy and numeracy should be on educating, supporting and resourcing schools and teachers to do this work, rather than on national level measurement, or imposing 'one-size-fits-all' solutions.